

Ethiopia:

Sheep-fattening transforms lives

When asked what life was like a decade ago, Misku Abafaris immediately says: *"In those days I was never exposed to any new ideas, any new approaches."* Then, after more consideration, the 40-year old mother of six turns to practical matters. *"I used to spend most of my time caring for my children and preparing food. And I'd look after our cow and help my husband when the crops needed weeding."*

In short, her daily routine in Gudeta, a small village some 30 minutes' walk from a tarmac road, was little different from that of earlier generations of women in Ethiopia's Oromiya Region. There were good years, when the coffee harvest was plentiful, and bad years, when the coffee failed or drought shrivelled their food crops.

But new ideas and new approaches, so lacking in the past, have recently helped to transform their lives. Their most obvious differences can be seen in the fields below the village, where half a dozen handsome sheep are being fattened for the market.

Sheep fattening: simple, yet effective

"With the profits I've made from my sheep, I've been able to buy a Boran heifer, which will yield much more milk than our local breed of cow," says Misku, *"and last year, when we didn't get a coffee harvest, we still made enough money from the sheep to pay all our household expenses."* She's particularly proud of the fact that her sheep-fattening business has paid for her eldest daughter, now 21 years old, to live and study in the nearby town of Agora.

"Misku's forgotten to tell you about the chairs we're sitting on," says Abafaris Abamaliqy, her husband. *"It was the money from the sheep that paid for the timber and the carpentry. And it paid for the wooden box where I now keep my clothes and my private things."* The pride he takes in his wife's achievement is plain to see.



Science for a food secure future

"I'm now earning as much money in three months as I used to make in a year..."

The power of knowledge and “value chains”

Misku and her husband are among tens of thousands of farmers to benefit from a project which has helped them to improve the productivity of their livestock and crops and – crucially – market their produce more effectively. Funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and managed by the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) on behalf of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Improving Productivity and Market Success of Ethiopian Farmers (IPMS) project was launched in 2006.

Goma, where Misku and her family live, is one of 10 districts where the project operates. The early stages involved the identification of crops and livestock which could benefit from activities to improve production and marketing. This followed lengthy consultations with farmers and local government staff. In Goma the focus has been on improving ‘value chains’ – linking production, the supply of farm inputs and the markets – for coffee, poultry, honey, fruit and sheep.

“Many farmers were keen to develop sheep fattening, but they didn't have the knowledge or skills to improve production,” explains Yisehak Baredo, the project's Research and Development Officer in Goma. *“Their sheep were in poor health, and it took them up to a year to fatten them.”* Misku's experience was typical: she used to keep just one sheep, whose only food supplement was kitchen scraps, and she made hardly any money fattening its lambs.

In 2008, the project provided training on sheep fattening for Misku and 119 other farmers. They learned, among other things, about the importance of providing their animals with protein-rich food supplements and how to keep them in good health. Such was the success of the first training program that the project repeated the exercise for 92 farmers a year later.

Microfinancing: a critical part

None of this would have been possible without access to credit, which was provided through a local microfinance institution. Talk to any of the farmers who benefited and they'll tell you in great detail precisely how they spent their first loans. Misku borrowed 1500 birr (US\$115). With this she bought five young sheep, a supply of cotton-seed meal, life insurance for herself and insurance for her five sheep, and de-wormers and other veterinary medicines. Three months later, she sold the fattened sheep and paid back the loan, leaving her a net profit of 1200 birr (US\$90) – a considerable sum of money in one of the poorest countries in the world. Subsequent fattening cycles have provided her with similar profit margins.

So is her story unusual? Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that she is a strong and respected leader, and the group of 30 smallholders which she chairs was immediately able to repay its loans in full – something several other groups failed to achieve. As a result, the microfinance institution has been happy to provide further loans. And no, in the sense that many other farmers have made a success of fattening their sheep and increasing their income. Over four out of five who received training shortened the fattening period to just three months.

“With the profits I've made from the sheep, we've built an extension to our house and bought a high-yielding Boran cow,” says Suchare Abamaliky, one of Misku's neighbours. Musa Kadir, who belongs to the same peasant association, has used the profits from his sheep to pay school fees for his children. *“I'm now earning as much money in three months as I used to make in a year from the sale of coffee beans,”* he says. He has ambitious plans to expand the number of sheep he fattens, and he's also begun to raise avocado and mango seedlings, having observed the activities of one of his neighbours.

This is the way new ideas are beginning to spread, across hedges and fields, from farmer to farmer.

Story prepared by

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